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ABSTRACT

The situational approach is one effective way of presenting students with technical writing assignments that represent "a close approximation of the writing chores which befall the gainfully employed technical writer in industry." The approach includes elements of both simulation and game playing, with some significant differences. The situational writing assignment includes three elements: (1) the situation, i.e., a detailed statement of the circumstances under which the writing job is to be performed; (2) the task, i.e., a description of what the writer must do to successfully deal with the demands of the situation and the specifications that apply to the writing assignment; and (3) feedback, i.e., the process of assigning a point score to the writing effort and of indicating the probable consequences of the effort in terms of its usefulness. The situational approach can be adapted to most technical writing assignments and tailored to students at any college level, and instructors who use the approach can expect a favorable response from students who benefit from authentic industrial writing situations, reinforced by appropriate feedback. (RO)

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A SITUATIONAL APPROACH TO TECHNICAL WRITING COURSEWORK

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JC 860 417

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A SITUATIONAL APPROACH TO TECHNICAL WRITING COURSEWORK

Technical writing instructors are constantly exhorted to make their assignments more "relevant", a code word which translates in educational parlance to "a close approximation to the writing chores which befall the gainfully employed technical writer in industry."

Consequently, most teachers aspire to some such approximation, while realizing that an unmodified industrial writing task is not the ideal vehicle for teaching communication skills. Instead, technical writing instructors try to adhere to what David Dobrin calls "the conventions of technology" (1:136), while tailoring the materials to the clasroom situation. However well-intentioned, this approach frequently lacks an element of professionalism needed to convince the student that he/she is coping with what Dennis Gehris describes as "an immediate and apparent need." (2:137).

One effective means of presenting the student with an authentic-looking technical writing assignment is the situational approach. It has been used successfully by the author and others in technical writing courses at both four-year and two-year institutions.

Relationship to Simulation and Game Playing

This approach includes elements of simulation and game playing with some significant differences. The situational assignment resembles simulation in that it seeks to provide what Max Miller characterizes as "representations of reality." (3:39). Other simulation ingredients incorporated into this method are "real

life" input and performance factors, with outcomes related to the results of actions and decisions. However, simulations for educational purposes are usually group efforts (2:137). The situational approach, therefore, must narrow the focus of simulation to adapt it to the solitary act of writing.

There are similarities to game playing in the situational approach. Both techniques present an opportunity for an individual to exercise ingenuity in response to a challenge, with some type of "payoff" as reward for successful completion of the assignment. Notable differences are that in situational assignments the element of chance is omitted, and realistic rather than symbolic performance is rewarded.

Elements of a Situational Writing Assignment

The situational approach consists of three elements: the situation, the task, and feedback. In toto, these are the ingredients which characterize most "real life" technical writing assignments. Exhibits 1 through 4 provide examples of these elements.

The situation details the circumstances under which the writing job is to be performed. It describes the job title or function of the writer, the product or service involved, the problem to be overcome, and the desired results or consequences of the effort.

The task describes what the writer must do to successfully deal with the demands of the situation. It generally includes a description of the style and format to be followed, the time limit (if there is one), and a statement of the grading criteria to be used for the assignment.

Feedback for purposes of this assignment is the process of not only assigning a point score to the writing effort, but also

of indicating the probable consequences of the effort in terms of its usefulness. It further identifies areas needing improvement, a service provided by an editor in a "real life" work situation.

The Feedback Sheet (Exhibits 2 and 4) provides an enumerated scale, ranging from 6 to 10 points, for purposes of record-keeping and grading. However, student writers are most responsive to the verbal evaluations which are included. Each response includes an assessment of how useful the writing product would be to its prospective reader. Some aspects of game playing are present, such as a "reward" statement for work well done, and an indication of how close the communicator came to "hitting the target". A touch of humor is not inappropriate here; it may lessen the sting of a low evaluation.

In the procedure-writing situational assignment (Exhibit 1), the student is put in a situation which frequently occurs in industry: a relatively inexperienced writer is required to create an operating procedure for a piece of equipment (on display in class) under constraints of a time limit. This information is included in the statement of the Situation.

The Task informs the writer of the specifications which apply to the writing assignment: No more than six hand-written pages can be accommodated within the layout, and terminology used in the description must also be used in the procedure. The grading criteria are provided, which require the writing of a procedure usable by a person who has never before operated the equipment (a casette recorder), as well as adherence to the writing style guide provided in class.

The Feedback Sheet for the procedure (Exhibit 2) includes some

"human" responses, such as "Well done! You've written a clear, logical, and complete procedure in the correct format." Even the lowest evaluation softens the criticism with a note of humor, though the author understands that some instructors using the situational approach might prefer more serious comments. Assuming that a score of 6 indicates an unacceptable procedure, the comment recommends a rewrite. In a graded writing situation, an instructor can limit the number of additional points available to a student for a rewrite or can permit procedures from all students to be rewritten for a higher grade, regardless of the initial score.

The situational approach can be adapted to most technical writing assignments and can be tailored to students at any college level. Whereas the writing of a procedure is frequently required of both community college and university technical writing students, the request for proposal (RFP) is generally a four-year college or university assignment. To write a convincing request for proposal, the student must create a document which informs prospective bidders of the specific requirements which they must meet to win a contract to provide a product or service. Although the assignment requires a higher degree of technical knowledge and writing sophistication, it is based on the same principles as other situational writing assignments. The writer is faced with a writing challenge similar to one which he/she might encounter in industry. Again, there are guidelines which must be observed (style sheet and source documents). Responses on the Feedback Sheet, again, reflect realistic reactions to the RFP in proportion to its degree of success in stating the problem clearly and concisely.

The Situation and Task stated in Exhibit 3 assumes that the student is familiar with the functions of a fiber optic cable and is

capable of interpreting information which appears on design drawings and lists of characteristics. Such reference to technical documents adds to the authenticity of an upper-division technical writing assignment. However, the basic Situation and Task can be readily adjusted to accommodate lower-division students having less technical sophistication.

Modifying the Situational Approach

The Feedback Sheet can be modified to expedite the evaluation process. For instance, the lowest point ranking in Exhibit 2 could be presented as follows:

6 Although your procedure has some merit, the following characteristics limit its usability (Note circled items.):

a. lack of clarity b. wordiness c. faulty format

d. technical omission e. grammatical errors

This type of presentation gives less specific feedback to the student than written comments; however, it could be a boon to the instructor who lacks the time to write on the Feedback Sheet.

Other modifications can be made to adapt the situational approach to computer use. However, such adaption is not recommended as it deprives the student of the benefit he/she gains from the act of writing.

Conclusion

Instructors who use the situational approach to technical writing assignments can expect a favorable response from students who benefit from authentic industrial writing situations, reinforced by appropriate feedback. This positive result will more than compensate for the initial effort required to prepare the assignments.

SITUATIONAL ASSIGNMENT: WRITING A PROCEDURE

The Situation

Your company, ElectroWhiz, has manufactured an AC/Battery Operated Casette Recorder (on display in class), which will be shipped to distributors in one week. Furthermore, your boss in Publications has just been informed that the subcontractor who had agreed to write the operating manual for the customer has gone out of business after delivering only a physical description of the recorder to your company. Because you are the only available technical writer, you have been assigned to write the operating procedure for the manual.

The Task

For the manual to be shipped with the recorder, allowing time for printing, you will have to write an operating procedure within the next hour. For consistency, you must use the terminology appearing in the description when referring to parts and features of the recorder. You need to be concise, as well as informative, as no more than six handwritten procedural pages can be accommodated within the layout of the brochure.

You will be evaluated on your abililty to write a procedure which can be used successfully by someone who has never before operated this type of recorder. Another consideration will your success in adhering to the provisions of the ElectroWhiz Writing Style Guide for Commercial Contracts (provided in class).

EXHIBIT 1

FEEDBACK SHEET: PROCEDURE WRITING

Points

10 Well done! You've written a clear, logical, and complete procedure in the correct format.

A first-time user could successfully operate the recorder using your procedure.

9 Your procedure is generally successful, except for:

_____

A first-time user of average intelligence could probably operate the recorder, with a little extra effort, using your procedure.

8 Two items weaken this otherwise successful procedure:

_____

_____

However, an intelligent first-time user, with time to spare, could probably figure out how to operate the recorder by following your directions.

7 Three items have put "hitches" in your procedure:

_____

_____

_____

A dedicated and extremely intelligent first-time user might eventually "muddle through" your procedure without erasing everything he/she wants to record.

6. Although your procedure has some merit, the following items limit its usability:

_____

_____

_____

You should consider rewriting this procedure, or the first-time user may return the recorder before the warranty runs out!

EXHIBIT 2

SITUATIONAL ASSIGNMENT: WRITING A REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL (RFP)

The Situation

The Telecommunication Project Team of Transco, of which you are a member, has designed a special fiber optic cable, needed for your Tele-T Communication System to extend the transmission of television and stereo FM channels beyond the capabilities of existing analog systems.

The team has concluded, regretfully, that your company, Transco, lacks the manufacturing technology required to produce the cable.

The Task

You have been assigned to write the request for proposal, which will be distributed to prospective bidders for the cable contract. You have two weeks (outside of class) to create the RFP in the required style and format (Style sheet will be provided in class.)

Your source documents are the design drawings, together with the list of psysical and performance charactistics. You must reduce the information from these sources to a clear, well-organized, and comprehensive RFP. Remember, any omissions or vague statements may be cause for eventual misunderstandings and/or even dollar-loss for Transco (not to mention the potential for job loss!)

You will be evaluated on your ability to create a request for proposal which is clear, well-organized, complete, and in compliance with the ;specified style and format.

EXHIBIT 3

FEEDBACK SHEET: REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL WRITING

Points

10 Nice going! You've written a clear, complete, and well-organized RFP. Bidder bewilderment should be minimized.

9 Except for the following item, your RFP states "the need" efficiently.

_____

Most bidders would be grateful for your effort.

8 Two items keep this RFP from being a total success:

_____

_____

Except for a few pesky phone calls asking for clarification, your RFP would have relatively smooth sailing in the Bay of Bidders.

7 If it weren't for the following three items, your RFP would satisfy all parties concerned:

_____

_____

_____

Even so, if you can stand the exasperation of having to explain everything twice, this effort might get the message across--barely.

6 Because of the following items, your RFP would probably not succeed in clearly stating your needs:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Bidder beware! You'd do well to leave the phone off the hook, or else prepare for an extended series of pre-proposal conferences. Better yet, let this version of the RFP be "chalked up to experience," and have another run at creating a well-thought-out, straight-to-the-point, easily understood RFP.

EXHIBIT 4

REFERENCES

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